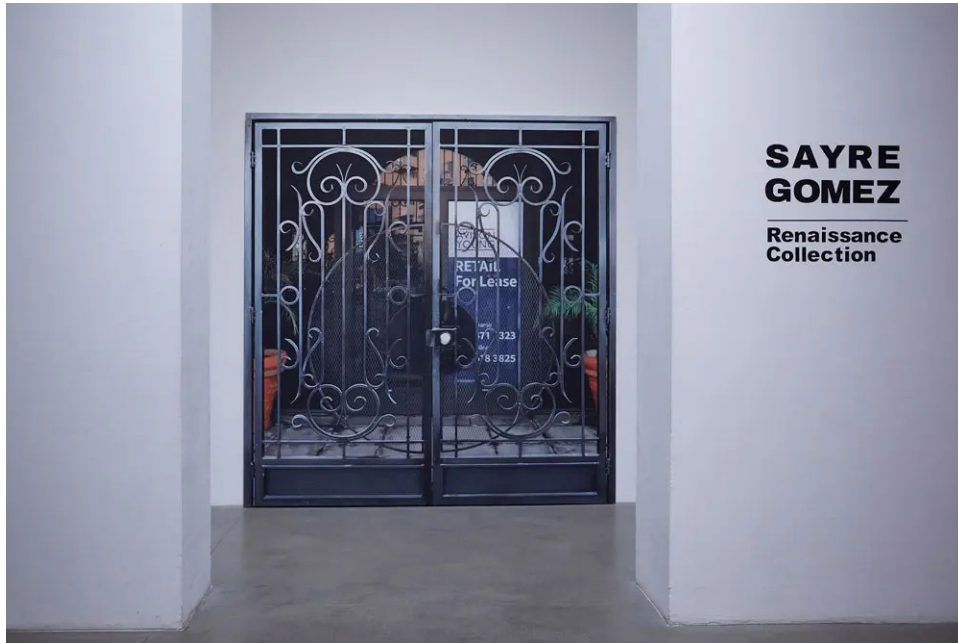




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# Sayre Gomez: *Renaissance Collection*

By Jake Romm



Installation view: Sayre Gomez: *Renaissance Collection*, Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin, Italy, 2022. Courtesy the artist and Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo.

Los Angeles, Umberto Eco wrote in *Travels in Hyperreality*, is a city in which the “eclectic frenzy, and compulsive imitation prevail” because it is a city where “wealth has no history.” Fully settled relatively recently in the American colonial project, it is a city which is home to some of the world’s finest examples of the *nouveau riche* aesthetic, which though capacious enough to encompass many styles, can effectively be boiled down to the sickly imitation of wealth by wealth. It’s there in the smog, even, a poisonous cloud that nevertheless gives the city its glow.

It's there especially in the architecture, some of the best (or worst) examples of which are the subject of Los Angeles based painter Sayre Gomez's exhibition of new work, *Renaissance Collection*, currently on view at the Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo in Turin, Italy. The show consists of five paintings focused on the eponymous collection of apartment buildings by developer Geoff Palmer. Palmer is notorious for being both a sleazy and rapacious figure in the LA real estate scene, and also, something of an idiot, having once claimed that "The Italians actually settled LA before the Spanish and Chinese."<sup>1</sup> It's this revisionism that's acted as an ad-hoc, or maybe sincere, justification for the gaudy faux-Italianate architecture of the apartments in the collection—with names like Medici and Da Vinci, they are as awful as they sound. Worse than aesthetic nightmares though, they are also moral monstrosities, intentionally closed off and hostile to the surrounding neighborhoods, and in some cases built over historic structures. Walking into the exhibition, the first painting to greet you is *Leasing Office* (all works 2022), with the titular office sealed behind a closed and ornate, but ramshackle, gate—a clear signal of the buildings' relationship to their surroundings. The Renaissance Collection is, again in the words of Eco, the pathetic work of a man who, seeking to "recreate Europe in desolate savannahs, destroys the genuine savannah and turns it into an unreal lagoon." Only here, the degradation is primarily in pursuit of profit, which makes it all that much dirtier.

Gomez is in many ways the perfect painter to tackle this subject. He works in a hyperrealist style, primarily using an airbrush and



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taking photographs as his departure point. Indeed, Gomez seems to take the photographs, apparently captured on an older phone camera, themselves as his subjects. The hyperrealism of the work thus extends to the strange, almost jagged outlines that objects take on in such photos when excessively zoomed in (as in *Divinci Staircase*). It extends also to the pixelation and blur of the fireworks in *Something Sensational*, and the muddiness of the highlights and mid-tones in the night scene of *City on Fire*. This gives the works a certain soft-focus that at once calls attention to their actual medium and also evokes even more strongly than other hyperrealist paintings—which go too far in the direction of sharpness—the photographic medium as it is most commonly experienced. There is an uncanniness to the effect, both a strange mnemonic quality and a feeling of not-quite-reality, reminiscent of a half-lucid dream. There's a sense in which the paintings, all night scenes or sunset scenes, also recall vaporwave, an aesthetic that played with antiquity-kitsch, soft focus, and sunset tones. This is particularly evident in *The Medici.com*, in which pinks and oranges and blues, set above a darker glass tower and the blurry colonnades of The Medici development, take on an almost animated quality. That vaporwave should be a reference point seems natural, considering the movement's half-ironic stance towards nostalgia, kitsch, and excess.

These formal decisions are not only stylistic, but actively inform the content of the work. The crassness of the developments combined with the degraded photo-quality of Gomez's rendering highlights the falsity of the fantasy that the developments seek to convey. No longer even beneath the surface of the fantasy, but on the surface, coexisting with the fantasy, is LA's glaring inequality and the horrific human toll of "luxury" development in a city where so many remain unhoused or in poverty. Gomez's specifically poor-image-quality hyperrealism also points towards the ubiquity of the camera, of image-making, of the ever-growing importance of spectacle and (false) representation. *Something Sensational* depicts a run-down sex shop with fireworks bursting above it, a clear metaphor for the pornographic quality of the Renaissance Collection and the fantasy of LA, as well as the horror that lies beneath it all. It's a scene so on the nose that it would work on the level of metaphor no matter the medium, but the work is elevated due to Gomez's hyperrealist style, which itself operates as a purely formal parallel of the central message.

There are two paintings of fires in this show—one, *City on Fire*, depicts a fire raging on the arch of the First Street Bridge, part of a string of arsons that have happened as a result of competition within LA's unhoused population for adequate sleeping space. Another, *Divinci Staircase*, shows a metal staircase standing alone against



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a sunset, the only remains from a fire that burned down much of the Da Vinci development in 2014 after an arson attack by what the press release claims was an “anonymous vagabond” enacting revenge against the social injustice of these projects. I am reminded most of the work of Alex Schaefer, who became something of a micro-celebrity for his paintings of burning Chase Bank buildings. But whereas Schaefer’s work is pure wish fulfillment, Gomez’s is something more. Though it is impossible not to sense a trace of glee in the works, especially the winking *Something Sensational*, the burning building and charred remains also contain a different sort of truth: we’d like to see this system, with all its tastelessness and waste, go up in flames, yes, but the desperation that set them ablaze persists, and the monstrosities get rebuilt.

1. <https://la.curbed.com/2014/11/25/10017950/7-awful-stories-about-the-man-destroying-downtown-la>

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**Jake Romm** is a writer and human rights lawyer based in Brooklyn. His writing has appeared in *Strange Matters*, *Photograph Magazine*, *Protean Magazine*, the *Brooklyn Rail*, and elsewhere. He can be found on twitter at @jake\_romm.